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ABSTRACT

This document presents a summary of a dissertation concerning the developmental relationship between moral judgment and person judgment. Subjects were 144 middle class male first graders and sixth graders from paroachial schools. The children watched three films of a boy doing damage. The experimentally crucial film showed the same boy transgressing on purpose or by accident, and within the context of one of three mitigating circumstances (anger, unreasonable request, or favor.) The Global Rating Scale, Behavior Prediction Test, and Projective Film Test were used as dependent measures. Developmental differences were apparent, and were discussed in terms of cognitive developmental theory. (DP)

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A DEVELOPMENTAL STUDY OF THE PERSON PERCEPTION OF YOUNG CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

In a developmental study which experimentally tests the relationship between the processes of moral judgment and of person judgment, 144 middle-class male children from parochial schools were exposed to three consecutive stimulus films, each portraying a young boy doing damage. The experimentally crucial third film, which determined the five experimental conditions, showed the same boy transgressing (breaking dishes) either on purpose or by accident, and within the context of one of three different surrounding mitigating circumstances (anger; unreasonable request; favor). The older more "subjective" subjects made significantly more "positive" responses than did the younger more "objective" subjects on all three dependent measures (Global Rating Scale; Behavior Prediction Test; Projective Film Test). Whereas the objective subject/judges did not focus in their moral/person judgments (all 3 dependent measures) on either intentionality or the surrounding circumstance, subjective Ss did focus in these judgments on intentionality and one of the mitigating circumstances, i.e. favor, on two of the dependent measures (global ratings and behavior predictions).

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Piaget's theoretical views, expounded in The Moral Judgment of the Child (1932) has become a standard guide to research into the gradual development of the process of moral judgment making. A number of reviews of moral judgment literature (Arnsby, 1968; Johnson, 1962; Kohlberg, 1963; Lee, 1968) have all concluded that research in the specific area of objective responsibility has produced the most consistent and substantive results. Approximately twenty empirical studies have corroborated the Piagetian formulation (the first assumption of this present study) that with age and cognitive development young children become less "objective" (focus on danger) and move "subjective" (focus on intentionality) in their responses to Piaget-type moral stories.

There also had been some suggestive evidence (Morrison, 1971a; Morrison, 1972) supporting the second assumption of this study, that younger ("objective") and older ("subjective") children also differ with respect to their focus on mitigating circumstances. Whereas subjective children, in response to Piaget-type moral stories, will judge the story character as less culpable due to some situational circumstance (e.g. a boy breaks some dishes after his father has made a very unreasonable request), the objective children seldom focus on such circumstances.

The third assumption of this present study states that the process of making moral judgments can be viewed as a type of person perception or person judgment. In the general area of person perception a number of studies (Jones & Davis, 1965; Peevers, 1970; Shaw, 1967; Shaw & Sulzer, 1964) corroborate

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the affinity between the areas of moral judgment and person judgment. For example, attribution of responsibility, a type of person judgment, involves a process similar to the assessment of objective responsibility typical of moral judgment making. If the processes are similar then the extensive research in moral judgment can be used to illuminate the process of person judgment.

There are three principle objectives of the present study: (1) To establish the strong relationship between the process of person judgment and of moral judgment. (2) To explore experimentally the effect of mitigating circumstances on the person judgments of children. Present technology (e.g. video-tape equipment) enables one to control extraneous variables to such an extent that mitigating circumstances can be more clearly studied). (3) To avoid some of the limitations of previous moral judgment and person judgment studies. For example, Morrison (1971a) has established that a multiple rating scale allows a child more latitude in his moral judgments and does not bias the child toward categorizing each story agent in both Piaget-type moral - story-pairs as "naughty," a technique used in most moral judgment studies.

The hypotheses of the present study emerge directly from the three assumptions of this study. Concerning the variable of <u>developmental differences over age</u>, it is predicted that the older more subjective <u>Ss</u> (6th graders) will make significantly more positive ("good") global ratings and behavior predictions on all three dependent measures (Global Rating Scale; Behavior Prediction Test; Projective Film Test) over all five experimental conditions than will younger more objective <u>Ss</u> (1st graders). Concerning the variable of <u>intentionality</u>, it is predicted that the older and younger <u>Ss</u> will significantly differ in their responses to the three dependent measures

(Global Rating Scale; Behavior Prediction Test; Projective Film Test), in that only the subjective subjects will focus on the different intentionality (accidental or intentional damage) of the transgressor portrayed in the stimulus films. Concerning the variable of mitigating circumstances, it is predicted that the objective and subjective subject/judges will significantly differ in their responses to the three dependent measures, from condition to condition, in that only the subjective Ss will focus on the mitigating circumstance surrounding the transgression portrayed in the stimulus films. Finally, it is predicted that younger and older Ss will not significantly differ in their responses to the three instruments of the study in the minimum information condition. In this latter condition the film actor is presented in "morally neutral" scenes.

METHOD

Subjects

144 middle class male children from four different Roman Catholic elementary schools were employed as Ss. First graders ("objective") and sixth graders ("subjective") were randomly assigned to each of six conditions, each condition containing 12 first graders and 12 sixth graders.

Stimulus Items

The stimulus items consisted of six different video-tape film packages. In each package the first two films depicted the film character, Joey, accidentally breaking a movie projector and then a wrist watch. These two films were identical in all five experimental conditions. The third film in each of these five conditions distinguished one condition from the other by combining different intentionality (Joey purposely or accidentally breaks 10 dishes) with different mitigating circumstances (Joey's father displays

great anger toward his son; Joey's father makes a very unreasonable request). A final mitigating circumstance (Joey offers to do a favor for his father) is combined only with accidental damage, since to combine this circumstance with intentional damage would have been very confusing for the Ss, thus adding a confounding factor. The amount of damage in all experimental conditions is identical in all three of the films. The three stimulus films lasted a total of approximately three minutes, in the five experimental conditions. A sixth condition, a minimum information condition (F), was added in which the Ss viewed 21 seconds of silent video-tape film depicting the film character in "morally neutral" scenes, showing neither good nor bad behavior.

Dependent Measures

(1) Global Rating Scale - a seven point rating scale ranging from 1 ("very, very bad") to 7 ("very, very good"). All Ss were sufficiently trained on the use of this scale before being exposed to the stimulus films.

(2) Behavior Prediction Test - a two-choice 20 item stick-figure test portraying Joey either in "good" (e.g. helpful or obedient behavior) or "bad" (messy, destructive, etc.) behavior. Presumably based on information about the film character presented in the stimulus films, the subject makes a choice of one of two behaviors he feels would be typical of Joey.

(3) Projective Film Test - 5 short video-tape films, each lasting about 60 seconds, each depicting the film character in the midst of some moral dilemma (e.g. Will Joey obey his father and watch his baby sister, or will he go out with his friend to see the big fire?). Presumably based on judgments made of the film character as a result of the stimulus films, the subject predicts what Joey will do in each of the moral dilemmas.

Procedure

After training the Ss on the use and meaning of the Global Rating Scale, the E asked the Ss to watch 3 consecutive stimulus films on the t.v. monitor. The Ss were tested in groups of three or four according to grade. Following exposure to the stimulus films, the Ss first rated the film character on the Global Rating Scale. Following this rating, the Ss then made 20 behavior predictions of Joey on the Behavior Prediction Test. Finally, the Ss watched five projective films (Projective Film Test) and predicted what the film character would do after each film. Responses to this latter measure were written down by the older children, but conveyed orally to the E's assistants in the case of the younger children.

RESULTS

An analysis of the data, employing analysis of variance and t-tests, revealed, as predicted, that older, more "subjective" subject/judges made significantly more positive ("good") global ratings, behavior predictions, and projective predictions of the film character than did the younger more "objective" Ss, in the experimental conditions. As predicted, the objective subjects did not make moral/person judgments (as indicated by their responses to the three above mentioned instruments) based either on the intentionality of the actor or on the circumstance surrounding the transgression. On the other hand, the subjective subject/judges did make differential global ratings and behavior predictions of the film character dependent on the varying types of intentionality and mitigating circumstance.

Related to intentionality, a portrayal of accidental damage within the context of the circumstance of an unreasonable request made by the transgressor's father induced more positive global ratings and predictions on the part of the subjective judges than did intentional damage with the identical surrounding

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circumstance. Contrary to prediction, within the context of a circumstance depicting a dramatic display of anger by the transgressor's father, the two types of intentionality did not appear to induce differential moral/person judgments on the part of subjective subjects.

Related to the effect of different mitigating circumstances, as predicted, the portrayal of the film character doing a favor for his father, within the context of doing accidental damage, resulted in differential global ratings, and behavior predictions by the subjective subject/judges, when this condition was compared with conditions portraying the same intentionality but different mitigating circumstances (anger and unreasonable request). Contrary to prediction, the circumstances of unreasonable request and anger, in combination with either intentional or accidental damage, did not appear to induce differential moral/person judgments in the older Ss. Also, contrary to prediction, the subjective subjects did not make differential projective predictions of the film's transgressor due to either varying intentionality or due to varying mitigating circumstance.

As predicted, the objective and subjective judges did not significantly differ on their global ratings and projective predictions in the minimum information condition. However, these two developmentally different groups of subjects did significantly differ on their behavior predictions in this control condition.

DISCUSSION

This study has demonstrated that cognitive structures, or the level and complexity of a child's construct systems, is important in how that child perceives and judges others. While a child is still very young (e.g. 5 - 7 years) he tends to be more simple, stereotypic, and naive in his judgments

and predictions. The pre-operational child sees things in terms of "black" and white", tends to judge others on the basis of little evidence, and tends to see others as "good" even when there is no evidence (e.g. control condition of this study). But when there is some evidence for making a judgment (e.g. a child breaks something), the objective child judges harshly and, it would appear, on the basis on only one cue (e.g. damage).

The older child (e.g. 10 - 12) is cognitively quite different. He is more cautious in his judgments of others, and seems to require more evidence than a few meager facts about a person before he is willing to make a committed and morally directional judgment. He is willing to infer behavior from his original judgment, as is the younger child, but the older child will once again make cautious (e.g. morally neutral) predictions of behavior in line with his original global judgment. The older more subjective child is also capable of focusing on cues other than the most dramatic one (e.g. damage). He can take into consideration a surrounding mitigating circumstance (e.g. doing damage in the favor condition), as well as the intention of the transgressor, in making his moral/person judgment of another. Such rather complex reasoning naturally presumes that the child's cognitive structure must be such as to allow him to use a variety of constructs such as "accidental-intentional damage" in the reasoning and judgmental process. It has been Piaget's (1932) contention that only when the cognitive structures are further developed can a child make "subjective" level moral judgments. In the area of person judgment some (e.g. Watts, 1944) have argued that a similar cognitive structural development is necessary for more complex and less stereotypic person judgments. Scholnick (1970) has shown how younger children usually focus on one cue, whereas older children focus on a number of cues, in making judgments. This present study has added further evidence that only the older

children seem capable of focusing on a number of cues (mitigating circumstance; intentionality of an actor) at the same time.

Although the circumstances of anger and unreasonable request did not induce differential moral/person judgments on the part of subjective subjects, one might argue that this was so due to the fact that the video-taped presentations of both these apparently different circumstances were viewed similarly in that both circumstances showed the transgressor's father as angry (although in different degrees). Further empirical research will be needed to determine whether these two circumstances are in fact viewed by children in an identical fashion.

The Projective Film Test did not appear useful in detecting differences induced by mitigating circumstance or intentionality. It is possible that this test was a very different instrument from the others and thus unable to detect the differences detected by the Global Rating Scale and Behavior Prediction Test.

Generally, the results supported the hypotheses of the study. Data analyses provided further support for the assumptions of the study that children differ with age and cognitive development in their moral/person judgments due to the focus of the subjective children on the intentionality of the transgressor and the mitigating circumstance surrounding the transgression; and the focus of the objective Ss on the extent of damage portrayed. Furthermore, the results of the study indicated the close relationship between the processes of moral judgment and of person judgment, in that assumptions drawn from research in the former area led to substantial validation of hypotheses concerning the latter area.

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Footnotes

1. The author is presently the director of the River Cities branch of the Capital District Psychiatric Center in Cohoes, N. Y. This study resulted from his research while in the doctoral program at the State University of New York at Albany.